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ABSTRACT

Before a general education (GE) program is initiated or assessed, a solid institutional foundation should exist, including a philosophy and definitions regarding GE. At Ohio's Sinclair Community College, the institutional foundation included a college-wide Assessment Steering Committee charged with developing a comprehensive assessment plan for student achievement and three successive faculty committees working on identifying basic skills, developing evaluation tools, and establishing across-the-curriculum assessment. In developing an assessment program at the college, one key step was ensuring faculty leadership in the effort. Another key element was the development of the following six assumptions regarding the purpose of GE: (1) assessment should be undertaken with a variety of techniques; (2) GE should have a well-defined identity; (3) assessment practices should recognize and encourage faculty uniqueness in course sections; (4) assessment should recognize individual differences among students; (5) GE should be reinforced in all courses; and (6) assessment information should be used to improve GE and the assessment process itself. The college also held a General Education Day, in which faculty worked in small groups to develop a vision of GE. Finally, to implement a GE assessment plan, the college designated a faculty member to act as GE Coordinator; documented support of the GE plan is being collected from all academic departments; and faculty are developing appropriate assessment tools. (BCY)



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# General Education Assessment: Starting and Restarting

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**Introduction**

Assessment takes time: time to plan, time to do, time to evaluate, time to revise. Assessment activities at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, have taken place in a climate of administrative support, availability of resources, faculty energy, and the recognition that many years must be invested to create sound educational practices. Faculty and staff at Sinclair Community College have been engaged in a growth process themselves as they wrestle with questions concerning General Education assessment. The following outline of processes including examples of implementation at Sinclair are presented for purposes of comparison: some of the ideas may be applicable at other institutions or others may simply find verification that we are, indeed, all on the same path, using the same basic processes.

Before a General Education program is initiated or assessed, efforts should be made to ensure a solid foundation on which to build the program and the assessment practices. This foundation would include the development of an institutional philosophy and definitions concerning General Education. It would also incorporate broad-based support for General Education through faculty leadership, college-wide involvement, administrative support (including financial support), and student input. The considerable time necessary to create such a solid foundation can pay dividends in the shaping of a General Education assessment program that

is reflective of the goals and concerns of many constituencies within the institution. This, in turn, will generate increasing support for General Education and its assessment.

The institutional foundation from which the process of General Education assessment began at Sinclair included a college-wide Assessment Steering Committee which, beginning in the mid-1980s, was charged with developing and implementing a comprehensive assessment plan for student achievement. General Education assessment was delayed until near the end of the process because it was viewed as perhaps the most difficult piece of the assessment puzzle. Program outcomes for all degree programs were developed by faculty first, using a variety of curriculum review methods, including the DACUM process. An Impact Committee was formed to create a structure for documenting the improvements resulting from assessment practices across the campus. The Shewhart cycle, Plan-Do-Study-Act, was used to guide these endeavors. Assessment at Sinclair has always been viewed as a faculty initiative, and faculty have been supported by administration in a number of ways, such as reassigned time for developing assessment projects, resources for participation at national conferences, inviting recognized experts and scholars of assessment to campus to share insights and critique progress.

The current General Education Committee, whose ideas are presented here, has been working since Fall, 1993. Prior to that, three separate faculty committees explored the issue of General Education assessment. The "first generation" committee deliberated about basic skills that were required for successful participation in college-level work and finally recommended mandatory testing of students along with required placement in developmental courses if indicated. The work of this committee enabled the college to make a clear distinction between goals for basic skill development and goals for General Education.

The "second generation" committee worked with the course distribution model for General Education and suggested that departments develop a battery of tests which could be used for data gathering. The benefit of this work was to present an evaluation tool which matched our concept of General Education at that time while challenging the college to rethink its goals for General Education. The result was a new perspective, now termed the "across-the-curriculum" approach to General Education.

The "third generation" committee began looking at, and struggling with, issues of across-the-curriculum assessment. Faculty focus groups were used to delineate common skills in writing and mathematics. In all, the work and dedication of these committees set the stage for current efforts.

So, within the above context, the college mounted a concerted attack on General Education assessment. The steps that were alternately invented, discovered, stumbled through, and in the end, found useful are summarized in these following sections.

**Faculty Leadership**

While it is true that administrators and accrediting agencies are involved in policy decisions regarding the implementation of a campus-wide assessment program, the heart of assessment is found in the work of faculty. One of the crucial elements of the success of Sinclair's General Education initiative is the leadership and dedication put forth by faculty in creating a meaningful program. General Education is a broad, complex, and variable entity; it is not something to be dealt with in a quick and superficial manner. Since General Education is at the center of collegiate learning, it is especially important to have faculty leadership define and assess core learning outcomes.

One of the crucial elements of the success of Sinclair's faculty-driven General Education initiative is the vision and ownership put forth in creating a meaningful program. Members of the college-wide committee included teaching faculty, department chairs, and one of six academic deans. While earlier committees had been primarily composed of faculty from the liberal arts division (the first program outcomes were lifted directly from the list prepared by liberal arts faculty), the current committee has membership from career programs as well. This committee was charged with review of the entire General Education program, including the General Education outcomes which were developed in 1989, and the creation of an assessment plan for the across-the-curriculum approach.

Faculty leading these endeavors have invested considerable time and effort in discussing ideas and have made the crucial commitment to stay involved for a number of years. Realistically, this process has been approached as a long-term project which will evolve to maturity over a period of years. The culture of the Sinclair campus makes it possible for this to happen because it is a campus with a history of developing new programs through committee work. By obtaining administrative support for resources to carry out activities, and by the freedom to work within a supportive environment, the General Education initiative has evolved into a meaningful teaching and learning activity. Faculty ownership of the mishaps, as well as the successes, has reinforced the idea that this effort belongs to the faculty.

In an effort to ensure that the committee did not get too far ahead or out of touch with the college as a whole, the support of a loosely formed, college-wide feedback group of senior faculty, administrators, counselors, and support staff was enlisted to provide informal critiques of what was developing. This group met with the General Education Committee and provided feedback and support which challenged and influenced the workings of the committee.

**Guiding Principles**

One of the most important things that was done by the committee was to decide upon assumptions about General Education. A small number of guiding principles or philosophical assumptions on which the committee could base its thinking, planning and decision making were discussed and then defined; the articulation of these working assumptions was vital. In its earlier "generation," the committee looked to standardized tests for assessment and toyed with the idea of producing a customized battery of test items, but decided this would be unsatisfactory. After spending time uncovering assumptions about General Education assessment, it was realized that early efforts were not quite on target and the task became easier. Any assessment effort needs to link direct'y to the purposes of the curriculum, and the General Education guiding principles provided that target.

The six working assumptions helped to define the task in terms of campus beliefs about the purpose of General Education at a community college such as Sinclair. As work continues on assessment issues, these basic assumptions have become the guide.

*Multi-Dimensional.* General Education assessment will be done using a wide variety of techniques. In addition, assessment will be done at several points throughout the curricula. With an expanded concept of assessment including many different assessment options (in-class, end of sequence, computer-adaptive testing, cross-departmental teaching teams, etc.) possibilities opened up for campus constituencies and for students.

The committee divided itself into small groups and each group tried out specific ideas or practices which sounded potentially useful. For example, one group looked at recommendations for a campus-wide style writing manual; another group became a cross-departmental team comprised of faculty from mathematics, sociology and computer information systems. The latter

group of faculty, all experienced in teaching courses commonly used by students to fulfill core curriculum requirements, adapted materials to provide better communication to students about General Education, how that particular course fit into the overall framework of General Education, and how certain class activities were directed toward enhancing overall General Education skills. Adaptations were made to course syllabi, homework assignments and tests. Samples of the class materials were later shared and discussed with colleagues. These experiments resulted in greater depth of understanding and awareness concerning General Education and its assessment.

*A Well-Defined Identity.* General Education at Sinclair needed a clearly defined identity. Consequently, committee efforts centered on identifying a small number of simply stated outcomes which can be addressed by courses focused on General Education skills and which can be reinforced in other courses.

Everyone knows what "General Education" is, right? Wrong. At least at this institution, the presumption of an accepted definition of General Education with an agreed on purpose was incorrect. The faculty was surveyed, met in focus groups, organized task force groups and, very importantly, queried students—all in an attempt to define what it is that makes a Sinclair student generally educated.

These efforts resulted in the identification of a list of seventeen components of General Education. These were distinct from the course distribution requirements in English, communications, mathematics, etc., which the college instituted in 1990. General Education is more than a set of quarter hour classes to be added to the program major. The following elements of General Education emerged from our discussions:

- Holistic aspects of General Education, such as critical thinking and lifelong learning, cannot be satisfied with distribution requirements. In fact, many faculty argue that none of the General Education outcomes can be fully implemented by completion of the distribution requirements alone.
- Written communication skills need to be reinforced in all courses, not just the English classes.
- Issues of diversity and global awareness reach beyond the social science or humanities curriculum.

While distribution requirements are maintained for a number of reasons, including documentation of the curriculum for the Ohio Board of Regents, a one-to-one correlation between distribution requirements and General Education outcomes has been eliminated. Working definitions for such terms as "written communication" and "critical thinking" were developed, defining what is common to all at Sinclair; this unique identity serves to strengthen the common mission and add to the effectiveness of the assessment programs.

*Course Commonalities and Individuality.* Each faculty member at Sinclair makes a particular contribution to the academic system provided students. Academic freedom and the uniqueness of each section of a course are highly valued. Assessment practices should result in improved systems, and those systems should recognize commonalities and, at the same time, encourage diversity and uniqueness.

*Student Commonalities and Individuality.* Students come into courses and programs with a wide variety of differing strengths, weaknesses, needs and goals. They will likely leave with differences among them. Since students and faculty are individuals, it is assumed they always will

be different from each other, and assessment practices should not measure all against one yardstick. These individual differences are not only acceptable, they are welcomed.

*Reinforcement of General Education in All Courses.* Faculty in each course are responsible for supporting General Education outcomes. To emphasize this responsibility, the review of across-the-core issues in General Education was prompted by the Vice-President for Instruction, and the first General Education Outcomes and Assessment Committee was comprised of representatives from various working groups on campus, including writing-across-the-curriculum, critical thinking, cultural diversity, and international education. With broad representation on the committee, the idea of General Education across departments and disciplines was born.

Now the college has a goal to infuse General Education throughout the curriculum, regardless of the major area of concentration. Assessment of these General Education skills remain the charge of the assessment steering committee which is devising ways to systematically collect General Education assessment data in the context in which the knowledge and skills will be practiced.

Attitudes and grassroots involvement are key elements in General Education assessment planning. Early in the process of vision and definition, it is important to seek, value and use student contributions. At Sinclair, student views were investigated through informal discussions in classes ranging from first to final quarter in a variety of programs. A survey asking students to rank important criteria of General Education found that students and faculty were in agreement about the central components of General Education, and that both faculty and students expanded the definition of General Education beyond the core set of classes.

*Improvement/Verification of Success.* The process of assessment and the gathering of assessment data continue as vital factors. It is necessary, however, to use assessment information to improve both the process itself as well as the effectiveness of General Education.

**General Education Day**

An impressive example of faculty participation and ownership of General Education activities took place at the first annual *General Education Day* which was held to celebrate and convey the idea of shared responsibility. Supported by internal grant funds, the day included a morning session during which all participants worked together to define and create a vision for General Education. Small groups of faculty brainstormed concerning their philosophy of General Education and created an artistic version of "The Generally Educated Sinclair Student." Participants then voted on the seventeen components of General Education which had been identified by the General Education Committee. Results of this exercise confirmed that the philosophies of the committee, of students, and of the faculty were surprisingly consistent.

In the afternoon small group work sessions were led by Sinclair faculty and focused on a variety of topics: written communication skills, oral communication skills, classroom assessment, teaching tips for integrating multiple General Education skills within a course, etc. The event, held during the winter break, was attended by ninety faculty members, and served to solidify the vision and purposes of General Education. Due to requests by faculty, *General Education Day, 1994*, became the first annual General Education Day. Now the day following the end of fall quarter is reserved for General Education Day at Sinclair. Participants believe the days are successful in large part because internal ownership of General Education is emphasized. Time is set aside for co-workers to get together to talk about teaching and learning, and General Education interest groups begin work which is continued throughout the year.

**Future Steps**

The hardest part of the Plan-Do-Study-Act may be the "act" part. Educators have lots of experience in planning and doing. However, the focus tends to concentrate on improving the process rather than the outcome. It is always easier to improve (or is it just change?) the process rather than assess outcomes. In thinking about the assessment of General Education, some important decisions that will guide future activity have already been made. These involve using multiple measures, multiple assessment points, and methodologies appropriate to the skill being assessed. Many lessons have been learned from early committee work and pilot activities, including the desirability of making assessment a natural part of a course so students will do their best and view the activity as another aspect of the educational experience. We've also found that we need to gain the support of faculty administering the assessment because faculty attitude will affect the seriousness with which students participate.

Once assessment activities are in place, what will be done with the results? How will the results impact the institution? Will outcomes, not process, improvement take place? Sinclair has chosen to use academic assessment as the foundation for program improvement. Can the same concept be applied to General Education? Can improved outcome results be achieved by linking academic departments and hundreds of faculty? The answers are not certain yet, but the challenge has been accepted.

In September 1995, the college took an important step by designating a faculty member to act as General Education coordinator. The charge of the coordinator is to both establish accountability and to retain visibility for General Education. The process of collecting documented support of the General Education plan from all academic departments is underway and is posted on the Sinclair Web Page (www.sinclair.edu). Faculty have been actively involved

in developing appropriate assessment tools. Currently approval of instruments designed for assessment of written and oral communication skills is being finalized. Faculty groups are beginning the task of developing measurement tools for critical thinking and values, community and citizenship.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to focus on pre-assessment activities which might be used to create a solid base for the actual development and implementation of a General Education assessment program. The central component of that base is ownership of the challenges of General Education and assessment by the entire college community. Significant strides toward college-wide commitment at Sinclair Community College have been demonstrated using this process. A clearly defined philosophy has been developed, and a continuous improvement approach to General Education which attempts to seamlessly intertwine assessment with student learning and faculty development has been accepted. Successful implementation will result in the steady improvement of the General Education mission.

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